



Remains of a small Greek theatre with the Ionian Sea and Mount Etna in the background.

MEDITERRANEAN MUSE

TAORMINA IS THE PERFECT ROMANTIC GETAWAY

BY BROOKE CHESHER

From the remains of a small sand-colored temple in Taormina's Greek Theater, the Ionian Sea spreads an impossibly blue sheet across the eastern panorama. To the west, the fog-shrouded slopes of Mount Etna and the Calabrian Mountains rise and fall. Standing in the midst of ruins against this spectacular backdrop, it is suddenly very easy to imagine tunic and loincloth clad gladiators brandishing sword and shield, and even easier still to envision a flame-cheeked Elizabeth Taylor, striding across the ancient auditorium to bring a guitar down upon Richard Burton's head.

Forget Venice. Ignore Paris. Rich with local flavor, hospitality and beauty, Taormina is the perfect romantic getaway. The long, narrow stone streets, Greek-Roman theaters, Spanish Catalan-influenced palazzos, and Baroque fountains of the Sicilian city inspire feelings of both quiet bliss and passionate fire. The verdant Mediterranean hotspot has long served as a muse for novelists, composers, artists and celebrities, from D.H. Lawrence and Johannes Brahms to Greta Garbo, Cary Grant and, of course, Elizabeth Taylor.



Above: Piazza IX Aprile (main square). Right: Seaside view from balcony of San Domenico Palace Hotel.

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PHOTO BY BROOKE CHESHIER

Yes, there's a reason Francis Ford Coppola is known to spend significant time here, as did Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote in their own days. Hugging the cliffs of Mount Tauro with beach towns spreading out beneath it, Taormina exudes old school glamour. It helps that the rise of the mafia happened just kilometers away in the island's interior. There's a mysterious elation to be found strolling along Taormina's main street, the Corso Umberto, and few experiences can compare to sipping espresso in the Greek Theater, with its spectacular sea and volcano views.

Less of a maze and more of a beautiful web, the city's steep streets are lined with old mansions and palazzos begging to be explored. In comfortable shoes, of course. And too, some of the finest hotels in Taormina are converted monasteries and palazzos, each elegantly outfitted with such comfortable accommodations, lush courtyards, umbrella dotted pools and exquisite dining that visitors may be tempted to stay within the hotel walls the entire trip.

The days in Taormina feel wide open, the possibilities spread out before you like the cornflower blue seas. While there is no wrong way to spend a day in this cliff city —

and nothing kills the romance like too much planning — below are a few possibilities to consider. Note: January and February are an ideal time to go, since tourist season starts in April and runs until September and October. While flying into Palermo is always an option, the Sicilian city is on the other side of the island. Flying into Catania is a much closer option.

WHERE TO STAY

San Domenico Palace Hotel: Perched on a cliff overlooking the Ionian Sea, rooms in this reconverted 14th-century monastery have gorgeous sea and mountain views. One of the most famous five-star hotels in the world, the San Domenico boasts more than just impossibly high ceilings, richly textured furnishings in golden hues and a fragrant one-acre garden filled with orange blossom and other Mediterranean foliage. It also is home to four exquisite — though rather formal — dining options, including the Principe Cerami, which was awarded a prestigious Michelin Star. Call 1-800-745-8883 for reservations.

Grand Hotel Timeo: Go for Baroque. While the décor at this 19th-century mansion is impressive, it's the star caliber service that takes it to the next level. Located right next

to the spectacular Greek Theater (one can imagine the views), the Timeo offers guests access to its outdoor pool, gym, private park, spa and library, not to mention its array of restaurants and cocktail lounges, including the Andromaco poolside bar. A free shuttle will transport guests to a private beach in the Bay of Mazzaro. It should be noted that only Superior and Deluxe Accommodations offer sea views. Visit www.grandhoteltimeo.com for reservations.

Grand Hotel San Pietro: The Relais & Chateau resort offers more than just luxurious digs; its location just outside of Taormina offers unparalleled quiet. A true resort, the San Pietro radiates with old school glamour, and like the Timeo, the 63-room retreat offers shuttle services to a private beach. The romantic icing on the cake, however, is the Rotunda sul Mare, a circular terrace poised above the sea where guests can make private reservations to dine between surf and sky. Visit www.grandhotelsanpietro.net for reservations.

WHAT TO TASTE

Osteria Nero D'Avola: Ovid may have written about Taormina's "sweet mullet and

tender eel," but he left out the candy-sweet baby pink shrimp and the rich flesh of the shoe-shaped lobsters (called langoustines) being pulled from the island's Mediterranean waters. No worries, Osteria Nero D'Avola's Turi and Alyaa will introduce any and all passersby to them, which is no easy feat considering the tiny restaurant is tucked discreetly into a corner alley off the Corso Umberto. The menu is in Italian, but Turi will happily serve as guide, and craft bewitching menus from wild game, seafood and produce they've caught, grown or foraged for themselves. The kitchen is small and open, the tables are simply covered in flowered tablecloths, and the restaurant offers a selection of local wines not found anywhere else. They don't have an active Web site, but locals know where to find it.

Ristorante da Nino: Located in the beach town of Letojanni, this seaside trattoria has been run by three generations of Nicita men and women. Mouthwatering homemade pastas and fresh sea fare make up for the less than inspiring décor. Like Osteria Nero D'Avola, local and sustainable are not marketing buzzwords for the Nicita family. It's just the way things have been done for over a century. The risotto with cuttlefish ink is not to be missed.

Ristorante Vicolo Stretto: While it's difficult to trust the Italian restaurants putting out sandwich board menu signs on the street, this may be the exception. Just off the Corso Umberto and up Via Vicolo Stretto, possibly the narrowest alley in town, is a restaurant bearing the same name. Classic Sicilian pasta and fish dishes, like the fried risotto balls called arancini, are best enjoyed on the terrace in this lovely hideaway.

WHAT TO DO

- Sip espresso in the Greek Theater. Grab some fresh produce from the small fruttiverdure trucks to take with you. With its majestic sea and mountain backdrop, it is startlingly easy to soak in the remains of the temple, arcade and auditorium of one of Sicily's largest theaters.

- Explore the shops along the Corso Umberto and then enjoy an aperitif — campari and soda, perhaps — while taking in the Cathedral of St. Nicholas and the Palazzo Ciampoli in the Piazza Duomo (Duomo Square). In the heart of the square is a Baroque fountain with the sculpture of a half-woman, half-bull.

- While Taormina has no beach of its own, small beach towns like Letojanni lie just beneath the city. Accessible by bus, their small beaches and brilliant blue surf are impossible to ignore.

- Hike the ashy hillsides of Mount Etna. One of the most active volcanoes in the world, its cap is covered in snow for the bulk of the year. In other words, it can get quite cool on the slopes. Another option? Simply taste the wines from these volcanic slopes at Vinicola Benanti. The Benanti family has been farming the Etnaeian soils since the late 1800s. Don't miss the striking red wines the Benanti grandchildren — like the generations before them — make from the Nerello Mascalese grape. Guided vineyard tours, wine tastings and lunches can be scheduled by request at

www.vinicolabenanti.it/en/home.

- Explore the rapids and waterfalls carved into volcanic rock by the eruptions of Mount Etna at the Alcantara Gorges. About 10 miles outside of Taormina it is accessible by car or bus.

- Renting a car and driving down the coast is always an option. The towns in and around Ragusa are rich with olive oils, cheeses and produce, all delicious reminders that the island of Sicily is the home to the Mediterranean Diet, an olive oil-based health phenomenon spreading across the United States. The nearby city of Noto, with its golden Baroque architecture, is not to be missed. Neither is the best gelato on the island. Chef Corrado Assenza runs Café Sicilia, the most delicious pastry and gelato shop in Noto. Iced coffee with almond-milk granita is a fashionable way to start the day in charming patisserie. Final note: While the towns along Sicily's southeastern tip are easily accessible from the major coastal highways, it should be noted that Sicily is not a small island. Starting early is a very good idea. ■

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